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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 SUVA 000086

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TAGS: [EAID](#) [FJ](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#)

SUBJECT: FIJI ELECTION PREPARATION: DONOR COUNTRIES

QUESTION GOVERNMENT COMMITMENT

Classified By: Amb. Larry Dinger. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[11](#). (C) Summary: Just twelve months away from the crucial election to return Fiji to civilian rule, there are indications that the interim government (IG) may be dragging its feet in preparations for the polls. An unexpected assertion of authority by the Electoral Commission into the detailed workings of the committee created to coordinate government-donor cooperation has raised worries in the donor community about how committed government is to the election timeline. At the same time, the seemingly interminable process of selecting a supervisor of elections is finally moved to the stage of interviewing the short list candidates, with the prospect of a winner being named by late March. End summary.

The Electoral Commission Stakes Asserts its Prorogative

[12](#). (C) The February 27 meeting of Fiji's recently created Election Donors Coordination Committee (EDCC) got off to an ill-fated start, feeding donor perceptions that the IG, if not actively seeking to hinder coordination on election preparations, is in no hurry to proceed. Minutes into an explanation by the New Zealand representative on a plan to dispatch two New Zealand election experts to Fiji to provide requested technical assistance, Deputy Supervisor of Elections Soro Toutou interrupted to inform the group that the chairman of Fiji's Electoral Commission, MK Sahu Khan, had declared that the proffered help would have to await further deliberations by the Electoral Commission itself. Toutou's reading of Khan's statement left little doubt that the Commission was asserting its claim to be the final authority over Fiji's electoral process. He said the Commission chairman would convene a March 6 inter-agency meeting to determine what sort of expertise and technology Fiji needs to prepare for and carry out its 2009 elections.

[13](#). (C) Representatives from New Zealand and Australia politely reminded Toutou and the EDCC chair, Justice Ministry Permanent Secretary Pio Tikoduadua -- a military secondee -- that the New Zealand offer was in direct response to decisions taken at the February 11 meeting of the EDCC. New Zealand Deputy High Commissioner Todd Cleaver explained that the two NZ experts, both of whom have significant experience with Fiji's May 2006 elections, are ideally suited to advise Fiji on its needs in preparation for the planned 2009 poll, especially those related to information technology. They can, he said, make certain that Fiji gets the "right fit" in terms of the technical assistance the donors would provide.

Donors Call for Clarity

14. (C) An exasperated James Sweeting of AusAID told Tikoduadua that, if the electoral commissioner plans to second guess the decisions of the EDCC and seeks to make decisions on technical assistance, he must begin attending the EDCC meetings. Khan and the commission had previously decided to remain apart from the EDCC. Kirk Yates of NZAID said the two experts are highly sought after international experts and having to wait on the commission's March 6 deliberation would likely mean an unavoidable further delay in the experts being able to come to Fiji to consult. The European Union representative said that without future participation by the commission, the EDCC would constantly be revisiting issues it thought had already been decided. Tikoduadua told the nonplused donor representatives that he would meet with Commissioner Khan to explain their views but could do nothing more than hope that Khan might change his mind.

Momentum Lost

15. (C) Having had a key agenda item undercut by the Electoral Commissioner's decision, the EDCC failed to regain its momentum. In a surprisingly short but telling report, Tikoduadua informed the donors that the government has succeeded in finding two vehicles donated by New Zealand for the 2006 polls but that they have been re-assigned to other use and would not be returned to the electoral office. The EU representative asked if the IG has decided whether electoral rolls will be entirely redone, at a projected cost of 7.6 million Fiji dollars (c. USD 5 m.) and an undetermined amount of time, or only the rolls of the relatively few districts identified as problematic during the 2006 elections. Deputy Elections Supervisor Toutou said this key

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question would also be discussed at the Electoral Commission's March 6 meeting.

16. (C) The donor representatives took some comfort in word that the oft-postponed interviews to select a supervisor of elections would begin March 4th. Australian DCM Andrew Martin told the group that the short list of candidates now consists of three New Zealanders and two Australians, down from the eight candidates recently announced. NZAID's Yates said his organization would fund the video conference interviews for the NZ candidates, while Australia would pay for the interviews with the two Australians. EDCC Chair Tikoduadua said this was the first he had heard that a South African candidate and two others had pulled out of the running. The winner is now expected to be selected before the end of March. The oft-delayed decision was to have been made by the end of February.

17. (C) Yates raised the need for government to begin providing the electoral boundaries commission with the census data it needs to redraw Fiji's electoral constituencies. Tikoduadua was unable to say what government agency has the lead to pull together the necessary mapping or other technical experts to support the Constitutional Boundaries Commission. Yates said there is an urgent need for the boundaries commission to spell out its requirements so that donors can respond. He added that New Zealand is prepared to offer particular expertise in the area of constituency mapping. Tikoduadua recommended that the head of the boundaries commission be invited to attend future EDCC meetings, a proposal that was well received.

18. (C) EU representative Michael Graf reminded the government representatives that, if Fiji desires to have EU election observers for the 2009 polls, Brussels needs to have a formal request by August at the latest. He noted a remark from Yates that Fiji government officials had criticized EU observers to the 2006 elections for having not come earlier. Graf said the EU observers had come weeks before the

elections and remained weeks afterwards, and the leader of the observer team had returned six months after the elections to present the final report to the Fiji government.

Talk of Confrontation

¶9. (C) In discussions following the EDCC meeting, Australian and New Zealand representatives expressed their extreme frustration with the unexpected intervention by the head of the Electoral Commission, since it in effect negated the decision taken at the EDCC meeting on February 11 to seek help of NZ experts. More generally, they said, the pace of the EDCC's workings is already reflecting either a hidden agenda of slowing down the process or, at the very least, an indifference to whether the election timeline is adhered to or not. In light of the increasingly short time before the proposed election date of the first quarter of 2009, Yates said, there is simply no time left to waste. There was agreement among Yates, Sweeting and ourselves that if the pace of future meetings does not pick up significantly and if the IG does not cease placing obstacles in the committee's way, donors ought to confront Tikoduadua and demand a greater effort to push forward on preparations or risk losing donor support.

Comment

¶10. (C) Whether intentional or not, the "Pacific" pace of the EDCC is a worry. The election is now just a year away and numerous pieces of the electoral machinery, many of them dependent on donor funding and technical assistance, remain to be put into place. The prospect of the Electoral Commission now asserting its influence in a way that will slow the process still further is not promising, particularly when the commission has taken the decision to remain aloof from the work with the donor community. Neither Australia nor New Zealand appear to be in a hurry to play the role of the bad cop with the interim government, nor does either want to see the process languish while the clock runs down. A further concern is the likely role that the head of the Electoral Commission may play in his dealings with an expat Supervisor of Elections, whose job it is to organize and carry out the polls. Without the Electoral Commission's cooperation, the work of the Supervisor and the boundaries commission will be hindered and more time will be lost. If Tikoduadua cannot show that the IG is serious and move forward rapidly in its dealings with the donors, the donor

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community will have to up the pressure on the IG to live up to its commitments.
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